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ABSTRACT

Most Americans think of the Fourth of July as Independence Day, but is it really the day the U.S. declared and celebrated independence? By exploring myths and truths surrounding Independence Day, this lesson asks students to think critically about commonly believed stories regarding the beginning of the Revolutionary War and the Independence Day holiday. During three 50-minute sessions, students will: develop strategies for critically examining the origin and characteristics of myth; develop an awareness of the diversities, similarities, and values in various cultural and story traditions related to the American Revolution; and develop strategies for examining messages for bias and missing information. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the lesson are included. An Independence Day Book List; a list of common myths about the Fourth of July; a group assignment; and a presentation rubric are attached. (PM)

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Myth or Truth: Independence Day

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ED 481 433

Author

Traci Gardner
Champaign, Illinois

Grade Band

3-5

Estimated Lesson Time

Three 50-minute sessions

Overview

Most Americans think of the Fourth of July as Independence Day—but is it really the day the United States declared its independence? This lesson explores all the dates and stories associated with the Declaration of Independence, focusing on the reason there are so many different dates and signings of the document and why we celebrate the nation's birthday on July 4th rather than one of the other dates.

From Theory to Practice

Historical events and holidays frequently seem like absolute truth to students; yet behind such events are many possible truths, myths, and stories, allowing us to discover who we were as people and who we are today. Although few young people realize it, understanding these truths and myths illuminates the ways that their values and beliefs have been shaped by the stories they have grown up knowing, by the education they have recieved, and by the landscape within which they have lived. All these contexts have contributed to their world views as individuals, as members of families, and as members of communities.

These activities explore stories, myths, and truths regarding the Declaration of Independence and Independence Day by considering the range of dates, signing, and stories related to the events.

Student Objectives

Students will

- develop strategies for critically examining the origin and characteristics of myth.
- develop an awareness of the diversities, similarities, and values in various cultural and story traditions related to the American Revolution.
- develop strategies for examining messages for bias and missing information.

Resources

- Independence Day Book List
- Common Myths about the Fourth of July Handout
- Myths and Truths Presentation Rubric

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Instructional Plan

Resources

- Internet access to the Web sites or printouts of the pages from those sites. (In lieu of the Internet copy of the Declaration of Independence, you can use a printed version. The piece is available in most American literature anthologies and history books as well as in the encyclopedia.)
- Copies of the lyrics and/or the video for the Schoolhouse Rocks' cartoon "Fireworks!" Several options are available:

  Book—Yohe, Tom. 1996. *Schoolhouse Rock!: The Official Guide.* Hyperion.

  VHS—"Fireworks!" 1997. *Schoolhouse Rock! - America Rock.* Disney Studios.

  Web—Schoolhouse Rocks: *Fireworks!*
  [http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/7316/Fire.html]

- Fourth of July Entry on the ReadWriteThink calendar
- Common Myths about the Fourth of July handout
- Myths and Truths Presentation rubric
- General classroom supplies (paper, pens or pencils, chart paper or board, and so forth).
- (Optional) Texts that explore the stories surrounding the Declaration of Independence. Possibilities include reference books, encyclopedias, and specific texts, examples of which appear in the Independence Day Book List.

Preparation

1. Gather books and Internet printouts, if necessary. Because students will work in small groups, create a copy of the printouts for each group if computer access is not available. Provide a copy of books for each group if resources allow. Groups may have slightly different reference resources (for instance, encyclopedias from different publishers), but all groups should have relatively the same collection of materials on hand. Naturally, you can encourage sharing among groups in the case of scarcer resources.
2. Make copies of the Common Myths about the Fourth of July handout and the Myths and Truths Presentation rubric for all students or prepare overheads or chart paper with the information.

Instruction and Activities

Session One

1. Students can complete these prereading questions as homework, as an in-class freewrite before the reading, or in oral class discussion.

   a. What difference does it make who writes a story as long as they tell the "truth"?
   b. How can you tell when a story is true? What would indicate a story was fictional?
   c. Have you ever read something that was presented as nonfiction but that you knew was fiction?

2. Spend ten to fifteen minutes going over students' responses to the prereading prompt. Write their answers on chart paper or an overhead. (You'll return to these answers later in this lesson, so save their responses.)
3. Read the lyrics to the Schoolhouse Rocks' cartoon "Fireworks!" As students read, ask them to pay particular attention to the historical details that the lyrics include.
4. After reading, ask students to write two questions of their own for the class to consider: one question that is answered in the text and an "I wonder why" question. Use a writer's notebook or response journal for this writing.
5. In small groups, have students share their questions and discuss answers. Monitor student

discussion by circulating among the groups.

6. As a postreading activity, ask students to think about the description of the writing and signing of the Declaration. Give them these guiding questions: What do you notice about the lyrics that fits with your ideas about July 4, 1776, and what seems unusual or seems to have been left out?

Session Two

1. In full-class discussion, have students share their thoughts on the events of July 4, 1776, in light of the "Fireworks!" lyrics. Write their ideas on the board or on chart paper. The idea is simply to brainstorm a list for now.
2. Pass out the Common Myths about the Fourth of July Handout, or show the list on an overhead projector. As you read through the list, encourage students to connect items from their brainstorming list with the myths on the sheet.
3. Demonstrate the "myth-breaking" process (outlined on the Common Myths handout and below) by answering the three myth/truth questions about the first myth on the handout: "The Fourth of July has been a legal holiday since the American Revolution." See the House's Kids in the House site About Federal Holidays for background on the myth.
4. Divide students into four to five groups, assigning each group a myth from the sheet. Give groups a variety of resources in which they might uncover truths about Independence Day and the Declaration of Independence. Pass out the Presentation Rubric for the activity, or show the list on an overhead projector.
5. Each group completes the following assignment, preparing to share their findings with the entire class:

    a. Explain your myth answering these two questions:

        - What is a truth in this myth?
        - What are other truths behind this myth that might contradict it?

    b. As a group, you may use any of the materials available to help you understand and explain the myth.
    c. Prepare a five-minute presentation to the class that explains your understanding of the myth, using creative drama, visual aids such as posters, music, illustrations, or an oral presentation.

6. As students work in their groups, circulate and monitor student progress. Let them know a few minutes before the work period will conclude so that they have time to wrap up their thoughts.

Session Three

1. Give students five to ten minutes to make last-minute preparations and to practice their presentations.
2. Have groups present their myth to the entire class, sticking closely to the five-minutes-per-group guideline that you've established.
3. Once all of the groups have presented, return to the original prereading questions:

    a. What difference does it make who writes a story as long as they tell the "truth"?
    b. How can you tell when a story is true? What would indicate a story wasn't true?

4. Read through the student responses, and conclude the lesson with a discussion of their original perceptions of "truth." Which observations do they still agree with? Which would they change? What would they add?

Web Resources

Schoolhouse Rocks: *Fireworks!*
http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/7316/Fire.html
Read the lyrics and hear an audio excerpt from the 1977 History Rocks cartoon, *Fireworks!* Choose the "S, T, & F" link at the bottom of the page for summary, trivia, and facts about the cartoon.

John Trumbull's Painting: *Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1776*
http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3a00000/3a04000/3a04000/3a04054r.jpg
Part of the American Memory collection, this reproduction of Trumbull's famous painting is presented by the Library of Congress. The image provides a great opportunity to talk about the difference between what the signings probably looked like in reality and this posed version of the event.

Liberty! – Philadelphia, 1776
http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle/episode2.html
PBS's companion site to the *Liberty* television series includes this page, focusing on the events of July 4, 1776. The page includes links to more information about the men and women involved and the historical context. Be sure to explore the site for lesser known facts. For instance, did you know that a woman was the first official printer of the document, as designated by Congress?

The Liberty Bell
http://www.ushistory.org/libertybell/
The Liberty Bell was chimed in Philadelphia to call people to the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776. This U.S. History site includes facts about the bell itself and its historical place in the American Revolution.

Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bdsds/bdsdhome.html
This Library of Congress collection includes broadsides, letters, and other documents. Be sure to look at the early printed version of the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence: One of the Charters of Freedom
http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/charters_of_freedom/declaration/declaration.html
This U.S. National Archives and Records Administration site offers high-resolution reproduction of the document, historical information on its writing and preservation, a timeline of its creation, and much more. Be sure to choose the "Join the Signers" link for additional information on the signers themselves and an interactive exhibit that allows visitors to add their own name to the Declaration.

The Declaration of Independence Home Page
http://www.duke.edu/eng169s2/group1/lex3/firstpge.htm
This site focuses on the authorship of the Declaration of Independence and the evolution of the drafts of the document. The site includes the text of the original drafts as well as of proposed sections that were not included. A hypertext version of the Declaration allows visitors to follow changes to particular sections through the various drafts.

Extension
Focus discussion on the difference between the image portrayed in John Trumbull's painting of the events of July 4, 1776, and the reality of what occurred on that day.

Student Assessment/Reflections

- Monitor student interaction and progress during group work to assess social skills and assist any students having problems with the project.
- Use the Myths and Truths Presentation rubric to assess group presentations.
- Assign an independent analysis and critique writing task to students which allows them to apply

their skills individually. The following general Independence Day Critique assignment would work well:

> Critique the pictures in a Fourth of July children's book, a poster, or an advertisement. Critically analyze the images and information in the book, noting the myths and underlying truths that are evident in the depiction.

Be sure to focus students on a particular detail to ensure that they do not become overwhelmed by the idea of critiquing all the information in a book.

- As a class, develop a list of questions or strategies for examining future readings and texts for missing information or bias (thus summarizing and applying the information from the lesson).

NCTE/IRA Standards

1 - Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2 - Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

9 - Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

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Independence Day Book List

Arndt, Ursula. 2001. *Fireworks, Picnics, and Flags: The Story of the Fourth of July Symbols.* Clarion Books.

Dalgliesh, Alice. 1995. *The Fourth of July Story.* Aladdin Library.

Fradin, Dennis Brindell, and Michael McCurdy. 2002. *The Signers: The Fifty-Six Stories behind the Declaration of Independence.* Walker and Company.

Freedman, Russell. 2002. *Give Me Liberty: The Story of the Declaration of Independence.* Holiday House.

Fink, Sam. 2002. *Declaration of Independence.* Scholastic Reference.

Landau, Elaine. 2001. *Independence Day: Birthday of the United States (Finding Out about Holidays).* Enslow Publishers.

Stein, R. Conrad. 1995. *The Declaration of Independence (Cornerstones of Freedom).* Children's Book Press.

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Common Myths about the Fourth of July

Myth: The Fourth of July has been a legal holiday since the American Revolution.

Myth: The Liberty Bell developed its famous crack when it was rung too hard on July 4, 1776.

Myth: The 56 members of the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

Myth: The Continental Congress celebrated the Declaration publicly on July 4, 1776 with a reading of the document.

Myth: The Declaration of Independence was unanimously supported by the members of the Continental Congress.

Myth: There were fireworks on July 4, 1776.

Group Assignment

1. Explain the myth that your group has been assigned, answering these three questions:
   - What is a truth in this myth?
   - What are other truths behind this myth that might contradict it?
   - What does the myth reveal about those who believe it?
2. As a group, you may use any of the materials available to help you understand and explain the myth.
3. Prepare a five-minute presentation to the class that explains your understanding of the myth, using creative drama, visual aids such as posters, music, illustrations, or an oral presentation.

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Myth and Truth: The Declaration of Independence Presentation Rubric

Category	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
Understanding of Topic	The team clearly understood the topic. They convincingly demonstrated an awareness of the biases and missing information in the material that they examined and the relationship between bias and culture.	The team clearly understood the topic. They demonstrated an awareness of the biases and missing information in the material that they examined and the relationship between bias and culture.	The team seemed to understand the topic. They were aware of the biases and missing information in the material that they examined.	The team did not seem to understand the topic and/or were not aware of the biases and missing information in the material they examined.
Presentation Style	The team consistently used gestures, eye contact, voice and enthusiasm in a way that kept the audience interested.	The team usually used gestures, eye contact, voice and enthusiasm to try and keep their audience's attention.	The team sometimes used gestures, eye contact, and appropriate voice to keep their audience's attention.	One or more of the members did not use body language or style to keep the audience's attention. Someone may have been a distraction.
Information	The team presented information that fully and accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the 4th of July stories. The information was clear and logical.	The team presented information that accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the 4th of July stories. The information was generally clear and logical.	Most of the information accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the 4th of July stories. There may have been some mistakes or some things that were not clear.	The information did not accurately explained the origin and characteristics of the 4th of July stories and/or the information did not make sense.

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November 28, 2002

The nation celebrates Thanksgiving.

By proclamation of President George Washington, Americans celebrated the first national Thanksgiving Day on November 26, 1789—to offer thanks for the Constitution. But this didn't mean that it was a national holiday. From that day until November 1939, when Franklin Roosevelt changed the date in 1939—at the request of merchants who wanted a longer Christmas buying season—the date had been in flux.

Read More: Thanksgiving offerings range from Dav Pilkey's *Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving* to Marcia Sewall's *The Pilgrims of Plimouth.*

Katy Hall's *Turkey Riddles* offers a model for students' own punning. Contrary to some opinions, the pun is not the last refuge of the scoundrel but the inspiration for understanding how language works.

Thank You, Sarah: The Woman Who Saved Thanksgiving by Laurie Halse Anderson offers students a glimpse of Sarah Hale's indomitable spirit and hits home the message that a letter writing campaign *can* make a difference. When Sarah Hale, an editor of considerable note, noticed that people were forgetting Thanksgiving, she wrote the president, asking that he declare a national holiday. Not a woman to take "No" for an answer, Sarah Hale continued writing for four decades and five presidents. Finally, in October 1863, President Abraham Lincoln responded to Sarah's letter by signing a Thanksgiving proclamation.

*1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*by Catherine O'Neill Grace and Magaret M. Bruchac provides an account of the Wampanoag side of the Thanksgiving story. The authors note that many modern descendants of Native peoples observe the holiday as a national day of mourning

Write About It: *Gobble! The Complete Book of Thanksgiving Words* by Lynda Graham-Barber is out of print, but students can take this idea and write their own book of Thanksgiving words. Graham-Barber's book was a compendium of words associated with the national day of eating—from the arrival of pilgrims to holiday parades to football. Ask student teams to devise their own categories for Thanksgiving words—and then start writing entries.

Teacher Resource: *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony* by James and Patricia Deetz gives down-to-earth realistic information about the Pilgrims, starting out with a description of the first Thanksgiving that draws from the only primary document from the period.

Web: A Thanksgiving Timeline provides lots of interesting information about how Thanksgiving has been celebrated through the ages—including President Truman "pardoning a turkey" in 1947 and the Native American's day of mourning in 1970.

Lesson Plans: Thanksgiving is a time when we see images of Pilgrims and Native Americans, often stereotypical pictures. Debbie Reese's lesson plan, Native Americans Today, challenges us to think about present-day images of Native Americans.

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